

## **Muddy Boots IO: The Rise of Soldier Blogs**

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A phone rings at the Pentagon. A journalist identifies himself and states, “I just read a blog that says soldiers use dogs for target practice in Iraq. There’s a video clip showing it too. What’s the Army’s position?”

How should the spokesperson respond?

Military web logs, known as blogs or milblogs, are small websites maintained by soldiers as informal journals for personal comments, images, and links to other websites. Blogs emerged concurrently with the Global War on Terror and have become an increasingly influential and controversial phenomenon. This form of communication gives a Soldier the potential to reach a global audience.

In the fall of 2005, in recognition of the potential effects of blogs on information operations, the Army began educating deploying units about this aspect of the evolving information domain. This paper explores the milblog phenomenon, its benefits to the Army, current challenges and the way ahead. It concludes that qualified support of Soldier blogs is good policy when coupled with clearly-defined boundaries and aggressive Soldier education.

### **Why do Soldiers blog?**

Soldiers create blogs because they are an effective and efficient way to communicate. Soldiers and their families now expect near instantaneous internet and voice communications as an essential quality-of-life element.<sup>1</sup> During deployments or other geographic separations,

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<sup>1</sup> Family members now expect superb connectivity and may send computers and phones to deployed servicemembers when they find it lacking. See Moni Basu, “Georgia Guard: The 48<sup>th</sup>: Georgia GI’s in Iraq often without Net,” The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 4, 2005, P. 6A. Also, “Thanks to facilities stocked with computers and telephones, soldiers were able to keep in regular touch with loved ones... Kadeisha Cornell and her

milbloggers communicate with friends and family in a way that is easier (many people type more quickly and clearly than they write), faster (traditional mail does not meet modern expectations of timeliness), and less presumptuous than email distribution lists. Once a blogsite is running, a soldier can post periodically and those with Internet connections – friend or foe, American or foreigner – can choose when and how often to stop by. According to OIF veteran Cpl. Michael Bautista, “I started the blog because I felt bad that I didn't write enough letters and emails to my family, and they can see what I'm doing, they can hear some of my experiences.”<sup>2</sup>

An equally important motivation is to communicate the soldier experience to outsiders. Soldiers understand that the public has become increasingly distrustful of mainstream news, and milblogs are a way to circumvent the media's power to select news content.<sup>3</sup> This “gatekeeper” function is the media's principal power, followed by its name recognition and access to consumers. Milblogs seize back some of this power, and many soldiers relish the opportunity to share compelling descriptions of their reconstruction and warfighting experiences as well as man-on-the-scene coverage of daily life. In an interview, Bautista stated,

It kind of transformed itself from a desire to convey my personal experience into letting people know the real story. I think the main coverage that you'll see at home is this car bomb blew up; this amount of people died. I think my main effort now is more toward showing that this is a good thing that we've done, regardless of, of what political decisions were made to get us here. We're here. We have done a good thing.<sup>4</sup>

Some milbloggers seek to counter inaccuracies in the media from a soldier-level perspective.

A high-profile example occurred in October 2005 when a teleconference was arranged between

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husband, Sgt. Thomas Cornell, talked almost every day while he was gone.” Claire Parker, “Tears, hugs greet GIs returning from Iraq,” The Fayetteville (NC) Observer, September 4, 2006, <http://www.fayettevillenc.com/article?id=241214>

<sup>2</sup> “I Wanna be a Soldier Blogger,” National Public Radio “On the Media,” aired on WYNC (New York) April 29, 2005, [http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/transcripts\\_042905\\_blogger.html](http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/transcripts_042905_blogger.html)

<sup>3</sup> Gronke, Paul and Timothy Cook, “Disdaining the Media in the Post 9/11 World,” paper prepared for delivery at the August 2002 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2002.

<sup>4</sup> “I Wanna be a Soldier Blogger.”

President Bush and a group of ten U.S. soldiers and one member of the Iraqi Army.<sup>5</sup> Once the communications link was established between Iraq and the White House, a senior Department of Defense official and the soldiers discussed what to expect. This preparatory talk, inadvertently broadcast live to the waiting news media, was widely pilloried by journalists as belying the White House assertion that the meeting was an unscripted conversation.<sup>6</sup> The White House and the Department of Defense responded to this criticism,<sup>7</sup> but the most compelling response – widely disseminated within the blogosphere – came from one of the participants at

*278medic.blogspot.com:*

Yesterday, I...was chosen to be among a small group of soldiers assigned to the 42ID's Task Force Liberty that would speak to President Bush, our Commander-in-Chief. The interview went well, but I would like to respond to what most of the mass-media has dubbed as, "A Staged Event."

First of all, we were told that we would be speaking with the President of the United States, our Commander-in-Chief, President Bush, so I believe that it would have been totally irresponsible for us NOT to prepare some ideas, facts or comments that we wanted to share with the President.

We were given an idea as to what topics he may discuss with us, but it's the President of the United States; he will choose which way his conversation with us may go. We practiced passing the microphone around to one another, so we wouldn't choke someone on live TV...

...It makes my stomach ache to think that we are helping to preserve free speech in the US, while the media uses that freedom to try to RIP DOWN the President and our morale, as US soldiers. They seem to be enjoying the fact that they are tearing the country apart. Worthless!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "President Addresses U.S. Troops in Iraq in Video Teleconference," October 13, 2005. Transcript available here: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051013.html>

<sup>6</sup> Reichmann, Deb. "Bush Teleconference with Soldiers Staged," The Associated Press, October 13, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> "Statement from Pentagon Spokesman Lawrence Di Rita," DOD News Release No. 1045-05, October 13, 2005, <http://www.defenselink.mil/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=8956>

<sup>8</sup> Long, Ronald E., Jr., Sgt. "Speaking with President Bush," <http://278medic.blogspot.com/2005/10/speaking-with-president-bush.html>, October 14, 2005.

This perspective penetrated the mainstream media after syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin cited Sgt. Long's blog in a column that strongly criticized the media's predominantly negative interpretation of the interview.<sup>9</sup>

Milblogs may also satisfy the author's need for a creative, intellectual, or emotional outlet.<sup>10</sup> Previous generations of soldiers wrote diaries or traded stories over a drink as a means of catharsis and retrospection, but many modern soldiers prefer the electronic forums that can be simultaneously anonymous and public. Those who desire interaction create milblogs that allow visitors to respond with feedback and support.

Some milbloggers desire to share lessons learned from their experiences. While on-line professional forums exist for junior Army officers, most notably [companycommand.army.mil](http://companycommand.army.mil) and [platoonleader.army.mil](http://platoonleader.army.mil), such forums do not exist for enlisted soldiers. Troops who are headed into theater routinely read the milblogs of those who have already deployed in order to be better prepared.

Lastly, more serious milbloggers seek to enter the blogging community. The so-called "blogosphere" is filled with on-line friendships and rivalries, and bloggers comment on each other's postings as well as engage in spirited commentary.<sup>11</sup> Bloggers build communities by creating reciprocal links to other blogs as a means of indicating who is worth reading. Greater numbers of links equate to higher search engine ratings, increased traffic, and more prestige for the blogger. Conversely, fake or inaccurate milblogs generate scorn and disregard in a community that is largely self-policing – a critical point in understanding blogging culture that is addressed below.

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<sup>9</sup> Malkin, Michelle. "All the News is a Stage," *Washington Times*, October 21, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Lenhart, Amanda and Susannah Fox. "Bloggers: A portrait of the internet's new storytellers," Pew Internet & American Life Project, July 19, 2006, p. 7-11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 18-21.

### **Qualified Support of Milblogs is Good Policy**

In simpler times (about ten years ago), the Army's corporate contribution to the public information domain was limited to what was produced by traditional news media at local, national, and international levels – coupled with post newspapers and unit flyers. At the individual level, soldiers wishing to publish a book or article, or to grant a media interview, were screened and their activities approved by their unit public affairs officer. Given that soldiers possessed a limited ability to publish, and given that existing mass communication had limited market reach, military control of soldier public communications was largely feasible. Commanders traditionally seek to maximize control of influencing variables, and they enjoyed effective control of this element of the battlespace. However, this also placed power into the hands of the press – Army efforts at public outreach were limited by editors and other gatekeepers who both filtered the Army's messages and controlled widespread access to the American people.

This era of institutional control has been replaced by one of greater risks and rewards. The Army can reinforce its communications with the mainstream media by declaring its independence from it using the tools of the modern information domain. Without question, the domestic and international media are not a neutral force on the battlefield, and winning modern wars requires both battlefield success and mobilization of domestic and international public opinion.<sup>12</sup> By communicating directly with the American public using the Internet, the Army now positively influences public discussion by providing accurate and timely information previously available only from the mainstream media – and only then if they chose to report it. In fact, Field Manual 3-0 Operations (June 2001) should be read with the understanding that the

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<sup>12</sup> Payne, Kenneth. "The Media as an Instrument of War," Parameters, Spring 2005, p. 81.

term “news media” includes direct use of the internet medium: “Public affairs operations influence populations by transmitting information through the news media. They fulfill the Army’s obligation to keep the American people and the Army informed. Public affairs help to establish conditions that lead to confidence in the Army and its readiness to conduct operations in peace, conflict, and war. Disseminating this information is desirable and consistent with security. Information disseminated through public affairs counters the effects of propaganda and misinformation.”<sup>13</sup>

Since the Internet offers the most rapid, efficient, cost-effective, and direct means of reaching a variety of target audiences, the Army currently maintains dynamic web sites to facilitate public information, community outreach, recruiting, internal (command) information, and media relations. This has dramatically increased the Army’s ability to communicate its story, to develop trust in its soldiers and capabilities, and to educate citizens about its efforts on their behalf.

However, this new domain is not static. The Internet news market is continually transforming as it is forced to adapt to technological innovations and the evolving media culture. One of the most important factors has been the rising influence of blogs. In September 2006, Technorati search engine was tracking 54.1 million blogs with an estimated growth rate of 75,000 new blogs per day, a figure that has more than doubled in less than a year. Blogs are updated regularly with approximately 1.2 million posts daily.<sup>14</sup> A Pew survey conducted in

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<sup>13</sup> Field Manual 3-0 “Operations,” Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 2001, p. 11-20.

<sup>14</sup> “About Us,” Technorati web site, <http://www.technorati.com/about/>, accessed September 15, 2006. By comparison, on November 12, 2005, Technorati was tracking 21.1 million blogs with an estimated growth rate of 12,000 new blogs per day, updated by 275,000 posts daily. “Increasingly, Technorati tracks other forms of citizen media, including video blogs (vlogs), podcasts, and amateur movies and videos --all in real time.”

early 2006 estimated that 39% of adult internet users (57 million Americans) read blogs.<sup>15</sup> This is a communications phenomenon that cannot be ignored. To remain relevant and effective in the information domain, the Army must engage the power of this new medium by accepting and managing risk.

The primary reason to support soldier milblogs is that they reveal the human face of the Army. According to consultant and author Robert Moskowitz, "Research shows that consumers get tired of the smoothly polished corporate message, and may even tune it out. Conversely, they tend to perk up their ears when they detect an individual's honest expression. It's the same phenomenon that causes hand-addressed direct mail pieces to earn a better response than identical but machine-addressed pieces." Moskowitz advises, "Somewhere in your company are one or more people who are passionate advocates of your products and services, who are good communicators, and who know exactly how to get the most from your products and services. These are born bloggers, and if you don't let them put their gifts to use, you're under-utilizing a major marketing asset."<sup>16</sup>

In a nation with decreasing numbers of citizens who have any personal connection to the military, blogs serve to educate those who are interested about the values, beliefs, and humanity of those in uniform. To augment the efforts of Army journalists, blogs offer readers a soldier's-eye report that seems more credible – straight from the trenches, complete with interesting anecdotes and colorful descriptions – a perspective that is clearly unsanitized by Army

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<sup>15</sup>Lenhart and Fox, 17. As compared to a study about 18 months earlier that estimated that 27% of adult internet users (32 million Americans) read blogs. (Rainie, Lee. "The State of Blogging," Pew Internet & American Life Project, January 2005, p. 2.)

<sup>16</sup>Moskowitz, Robert. "Five Reasons to Blog," iMedia Connection, March 14, 2005.  
<http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/5229.asp>

leadership.<sup>17</sup> According to one retired officer, “The best blogs offer a taste of reality of Iraq or Afghanistan that the news media rarely capture. And they’re often a grand, irreverent hoot.”<sup>18</sup>

This fresh perspective is of particular value to prospective recruits anxious to learn what the Army is *really* like. Blogs offer a means to connect with these recruits, their family members, and other influencers. Most milblogs contain extensive explanations about why the author decided to join the service, the personal growth and benefits gained from military service, and language that is surprisingly pro-Army, pro-chain-of-command, and pro-mission.

In fact, the more that the military personnel who blog are perceived as honorable, interesting, intelligent people, the more that the public will respond with support, trust in our warfighting abilities, and their presence in our ranks. During this period of intense warfighting, the Army receives consistent media coverage and concurrent public interest. However, should the Army’s news profile decline, milblogs will serve to maintain an essential and unique contact with citizens seeking insight into our organization.

A secondary, but equally vital reason to support blogs is to allow military bloggers to counter falsehood propagated on other blogs. Bloggers themselves exert a significant control on fellow bloggers, and the blogging community is to a large degree, self-policing. This policing function is one the Army cannot perform for itself, for “official” blogs are not well-received in the blogosphere.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, to silence the most credible voices – those at the spear’s edge – and to

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<sup>17</sup> This article specifically focuses on blogs, but much of the content applies to videos created by soldiers and posted on-line to sites such as <http://www.youtube.com/> or <http://www.ifilm.com/>. For example, “Lazy Ramadi,” produced by Indiana National Guardsmen SSG Matt Wright and SSG Josh Dobbs, became an overnight sensation among both military and civilian viewers, and was profiled by ABC News. See “Soldiers Turn SNL Rap Skit Into ‘Lazy Ramadi’: Rapping About Pizza and Muncie, Ind., Iraq Video Becomes an Internet Hit,” ABC News, May 18, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=1979301>.

<sup>18</sup> Peters, Ralph. “Reporting for Duty,” *Army Times*, Oct. 17, 2005, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Corporate blogs tend to fail because either the company’s message is exposed as false by other bloggers, or because the company fails to identify the blog as corporately-owned. According to one study, “Bloggers have an almost visceral reaction to these and see them as intruding on sacred ground. Blogs pride themselves on their transparency and independence from corporate ties. When a blog pops up that is obviously biased and lacks these



disallow them this function is to handicap ourselves on a vital, very real battlefield. The reputation of the Army is maintained on many fronts, and no one fights harder on its behalf than our young soldiers. We must allow them access to the fight.

### **Troubles with Milblogs**

Of course, some milblog perspectives may be undesirable. Soldiers may use blogs as a forum for airing legitimate grievances or self-indulgent whining. Soldiers may also misrepresent, lie, exaggerate, backstab, embarrass, or play out personal feuds. But just as most readers consult multiple blogs in order to gain context, leaders should view an undesirable posting in context with the entirety of the blog and the overall blogosphere. The Army position should be that *while we seek to protect operational security and individual privacy, we have nothing to hide, much to communicate, and we are comprised of over a million uniformed individuals with over a million perspectives*. Public affairs officers should tell the news media that leaders want to know when something is wrong, though we traditionally rely on long-established chains-of-command for communicating, investigating, and fixing problems. In addition, the blogosphere is not the most efficient or effective means of whistle blowing, because the Army has long-standing mechanisms in place, such as the Inspector General and Equal Opportunity representatives, who are available to support whistleblowers.

The worst-case milblog scenario is the release of sensitive information that jeopardizes the success and safety of a future operation. Clearly, soldiers should do no harm with their

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two important traits, it is immediately suspect... Corporate blogs have been most successful when they have been run by – and subsequently identified with – one individual. Often this is the CEO or another high ranking officer in a company... (1) They have a personal touch and do not seem to have the “Approved by the PR Department” stamp on them and (2) They touch on a variety of subjects.” From “Introduction to Blogs: A quick guide to understanding and maximizing communication efforts in the blogosphere,” Bacon’s Executive White Paper Series, Volume I, 2005.

communications. If milblogs include inappropriate information about units and missions, this represents an unacceptable breakdown of discipline, unit cohesion, and Army culture – and also implies that leaders, OPSEC officers, and public affairs officers (PAOs) have failed to educate their commands about information security. More senior milbloggers seem to understand these risks intuitively, although all milbloggers need clear-cut guidance.<sup>20</sup>

The August 2005 ALARACT message from the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, stated that commanders should be highly aware of this potential problem.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, any instance of breeched operational security may have catastrophic consequences. However, the potential for an OPSEC violation has thus far outstripped the reality experienced by commanders in the field – since 2001, hundreds of blogs have originated from deployed and stateside locations, and there appear to be few instances where commanders have directed that milblogs be discontinued or violators punished with administrative, non-judicial, or judicial punishment. At the most basic level, the evident discretion of milbloggers may be linked to their own personal interests as combatants operating within the region.

“Security violations are rare,” stated Brig. Gen. Carter Ham, the commander of well-known blogger and now published author, Spc. Colby Buzzell ([www.cbftw.blogspot.com](http://www.cbftw.blogspot.com)). “While

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<sup>20</sup> Younger soldiers such as Colby Buzzell <http://cbftw.blogspot.com/>, a milblogger whose posts earned command attention, are less cautious than their experienced elders. In contrast, the popular blog allegedly written by a 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt, “Dadmanly” <http://dadmanly.blogspot.com/2005/08/profiles-ncoic.html> wrote following an operation, “I can’t share details about this attack, because to do so would:

- \* Aid an enemy making a Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) of the success of their attack;
- \* Spread knowledge of the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) to other cells that otherwise might not learn of new methods;
- \* Jeopardize operations security (OPSEC) for the Scouts, Quick Reaction Force (QRF) and other first responders to Jihadist attacks; and
- \* Open up specific unit and leader decision-making to inappropriate public scrutiny. This can create situations where information necessarily incomplete due to immediacy, preservation of individual Soldier rights, and classification, would otherwise distort how the overall information might be received and interpreted.

These are not trivial concerns.”

<sup>21</sup> Schoomaker, Peter J. “Chief of Staff of the Army OPSEC Guidance,” ALARACT, August 23, 2005. This message built on a previous message from Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Richard A. Cody, “Sensitive Photographs,” ALARACT, February 14, 2005.

[operational security] is a very real everyday concern for us, I do not see potential violations as widespread.”<sup>22</sup> Buzzell himself states that he was called to account for two blogged observations: that his unit ran low on water during an extended operation and the steps he took to obtain additional ammunition during a firefight. He subsequently removed both items following counseling and command intervention, but he was specifically not ordered to discontinue his blog.<sup>23</sup>

Of lesser, but significant concern, is the milblogged publication of information that does not jeopardize security but violates UCMJ, policy, or the Army’s sense of propriety. Soldiers may share opinions about how to distribute and employ resources in the defense of our nation, but our professional ethic demands that we refrain from partisan banter and public criticism of the chain-of-command. While the most senior officers are called upon to provide policy advice to civilian leadership, all soldiers must refrain from public political commentary – very few identifiable milbloggers do so because they understand the penalties for breaching political boundaries set by UCMJ and DOD directives.<sup>24</sup> One milblog, written by an Army doctor, revealed the numbers and types of casualties as well as the overwhelmed medical system following the December 21, 2005, Mosul mess hall bombing; the immediacy of the blog, prior to notification of next-of-kin, increased the stress on frantic families awaiting word – the doctor was ordered to discontinue blogging.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, milblogs must not infringe on the privacy rights of soldiers and their family members; concerns range from real-time information and images of dead, wounded, or compromised individuals – friendly, enemy, or noncombatant – to the follies and foibles of

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<sup>22</sup> Cooper, Christopher. “Army Blogger’s Tale Attract Censors’ Eyes,” Wall Street Journal, Sept. 9, 2004, p. B1.

<sup>23</sup> Cooper.

<sup>24</sup> See UCMJ Art. 88, “Contempt Toward Officials,” and DOD Directive 1344.10 “.Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces on Active Duty,” August 2, 2004. Also DOD Directive 1325.6, “Guidelines for Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces,” October 1, 1996, certified current as of December 1, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Maj. Michael Cohen’s blog at [http://www.67cshdocs.com/Daily\\_Journals/December/dec21.htm](http://www.67cshdocs.com/Daily_Journals/December/dec21.htm) Also, Associated Press, “Military doctor closes online war diary,” January 5, 2005.

identifiable colleagues. While the products of embedded media are constrained by the contractual embedding agreement with the Department of Defense that forbids a range of images and topics, the products of milbloggers are under no such clearly-defined, official restraint or review.

At the unit commander level, the most basic, gut-level problem with milblogs is the fact that soldiers may publish anonymous, real-time information about the Army without the Army's knowledge. These concerns are expressed as (1) "Who speaks for the Army?" (2) "If everyone may speak, what is the impact?" and (3) "What controls, if any, should the Army impose on soldiers?" Current guidelines are adequate for printed books and articles, and most soldiers comply with the requirement to consult a PAO if they wish to publish military content or to use their military rank or title. Such PAOs serve the Army by ensuring that our personnel do not violate the traditional concerns of security, accuracy, policy, or propriety, and usually require the addition of a codicil, such as: "This work does not reflect the views of the Department of the Army. The views here are his own." At present, no such checks or statements are required on electronic communications, though many milbloggers voluntarily post a codicil.

Many leaders are aware that milblogs may serve to spread information that damaging to unit morale, to create forums for gripes and hearsay, or to assist enemies in assessing our unit morale and other intangibles. Such forums may reveal embarrassing unmet needs for Army materiel, command information, and up-to-date lessons learned. When the identity of a discontented milblogger becomes known to his or her unit, it may require extraordinary restraint for a leader to allow the blog to continue. But what is perceived as bad news may not be bad – if a unit is having difficulties, blogs represent alternative means of communication with Army and outside leadership. The release of such information may be uncomfortable and embarrassing, but

depending on how the blog is written, it need not represent indiscipline. Unremittingly positive blogs are both rare and unrealistic.

When a milblogger writes about the negative emotions and discomfort associated with military service, deployment, and war, this may accurately reflect that soldier's experience. As the Army carries out the will of lawfully-elected leadership on behalf of the American people, we want our fellow citizens to understand the true costs of service, to include the burdens, the loss of comrades, and the toll on loved ones.<sup>26</sup>

A final, potentially significant problem is the prospect of phony milblogs. Some individuals are aspirational soldiers, particularly in the mostly anonymous world of cyberspace. Similar to imposters who claim to be former members of the Special Forces or SEALs, some civilians may choose to misrepresent themselves and blog wrong or harmful information. Such a blog might read, "I can't tell anyone what I saw for fear of retribution, but tonight we committed atrocities in my sector of Iraq..." If the media picks up this phony story, what then?

### **Milblog Controls**

A basic truth is that the Army cannot effectively mandate that its personnel refrain from all public communications. To do so, the Army would need to withhold access to all means of communications, for family members and friends are not restricted from publicly releasing information received by regular mail, email or phone.<sup>27</sup> In fact, anecdotal evidence from fellow soldiers indicates that private soldier communications to family members, who subsequently make inadvertent or intentional public statements, are the primary source of leaked sensitive

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<sup>26</sup> Those who are concerned that enemy forces will use anonymous milblogs to gauge morale or feed enemy propaganda should consider the current effects of U.S. editorial pages and the public statements of political leaders, both of which have been cited in enemy communiqués.

<sup>27</sup> Witness the large number of blogs maintained by spouses and parents, such as one of the longest running: <http://an-army-wife-life.com/>

information. Some Army units do institute temporary lock-down procedures immediately prior to significant operations or following a unit casualty, but this is not a feasible long-term control.

Instead, risk is best managed by educating and trusting soldiers. Given our values-based organization, the Army should make the same assumptions as many U.S. corporations. A review of current corporate blogging policies reveals that they are grounded in a belief that employees must be educated as to what is allowable and forbidden in a clearly written, comprehensive, well-publicized document – but the bottom line is that successful companies believe and communicate that their employees are reasonable, trustworthy, and acting in the company's best interest.<sup>28</sup>

Just as milblog producers can be expected to exercise self-control, milblog consumers can be expected to exercise their own controls, adopting the concept of *caveat emptor*, "Let the buyer beware." Akin to news aficionados who reference several different news sources, milblog consumers are likely to monitor a variety of milblogs in order to expand their understanding of the soldier experience. Obviously, quality-control measures do not exist for milblogs, just as quality-control measures do not exist for most Internet websites. Therefore, some milblog consumers will choose to expand their understanding of the Army story by visiting official websites such as [www.army.mil](http://www.army.mil) – to the ultimate benefit of the service.

An additional control is that the mainstream news media are particularly cautious about using information reported solely in the blogosphere, particularly since news content is now so thoroughly scrubbed by bloggers themselves. A well-known example occurred in February 2005 when the *Associated Press* reported that an Iraqi militant website had posted the image of a

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<sup>28</sup> "Corporate Blogging Policies: Introduction," [http://en.blogworkers.com/archives/2005/03/corporate\\_blogg.html](http://en.blogworkers.com/archives/2005/03/corporate_blogg.html), accessed 7/16/2005.

captured U.S. soldier and the threat of his beheading unless Iraqi prisoners were released.<sup>29</sup>

While the *AP* article noted that the claim and the photo's authenticity could not be confirmed, the organization was subsequently embarrassed when bloggers quickly researched and revealed the "captive's" true identity as a plastic toy action figure.

For the media, a milblog cannot serve as an anonymous source, because no relationship and thus no trust have been established between the journalist and the blogger. To do so would be similar to trusting the contents of a leaflet found blowing in the street, and equates to a violation of journalistic ethics.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, a reporter is duty-bound to authenticate a blogged source. How to do so? The author, an Army spokesperson, has received several inquiries from the mainstream media regarding blogged content. The real-life example that opened this paper – a journalist requesting information about a blogged account of soldiers shooting dogs – occurred because the journalist sought not only comment, but the confirmation needed to publish the account. Such contact gives the Army the opportunity to mitigate the impact of negative information by assisting the media with accuracy and context.

Regardless, bloggers themselves exert a significant control on fellow bloggers. As mentioned previously, the blogging community is incestuous, and to a large degree, self-policing. While many civilian bloggers post political content, the clear majority of current milbloggers tend to avoid postings that might be construed as disrespectful to the chain-of-command. Most soldiers understand that by donning a uniform, they have voluntarily agreed to limit their free speech and political activity – a point that milbloggers advise amongst

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<sup>29</sup> Reid, Robert H. "Questions raised over Web claim of soldier kidnapped in Iraq." *Associated Press*. February 1, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> In one study, 53% of journalists self-reported that they use blogs for story ideas, but only 1% were willing to state that they find blogs to be credible. "Rebuilding Trust: Rebuilding Credibility in the Newsroom and Boardroom." Eleventh Annual Survey of the Media with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, August 18, 2005, p. 27.

themselves.<sup>31</sup> Milblogs frequently link to other milblogs and comment on each other's content. Thus, the most credible milblogs are those that have been recognized by a small cadre of hard-core bloggers, and thereby have survived the self-policing provided by those currently in the field, those who have returned from the field, and veterans who know enough to be able to assume this role.

In fact, the online community takes pride in outing all forms of deception, and often are the first reveal falsehood. The more commonly known examples are "Rathergate" and "Easongate." On September 8, 2004, a "60 Minutes Wednesday" story questioned the prior service of President Bush in the Texas Air National Guard based on an inauthentic document. When bloggers exposed that the report was factually false, CBS resisted, then apologized, and ultimately Dan Rather resigned with two years left on his contract.<sup>32</sup> On January 27, 2005, CNN news chief Eason Jordan publicly accused the US military of deliberately targeting journalists with lethal force. Jordan subsequently recanted, but a blogger who publicized the comments ignited a controversy that forced Jordan to resign 15 days later.<sup>33</sup> As well, such online outing takes place within the blogosphere to authenticate or invalidate those who pass themselves off as veterans or awardees, particularly those who claim affiliation with elite military organizations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Greyhawk, the founder of MilBlogs located at <http://www.mudvillegazette.com/>, advises milbloggers to "Write under the assumption that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and your mother will read your stuff and know you wrote it." As related to the Army Times, "10 Tips for Posting Your Blog," March 16, 2005, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Thornburgh, Dick and Louis D. Boccardi. "Report of the Independent Review Panel on the Sept. 8, 2004, *60 Minutes Wednesday* Segment "For the Record" Concerning President Bush's Texas Air National Guard Service," January 5, 2005. Available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/>

<sup>33</sup> A "blogstorm" of protest erupted when Rony Abovitz broke the story the morning of January 28, 2005: [http://www.forumblog.org/blog/2005/01/do\\_us\\_troops\\_ta.html](http://www.forumblog.org/blog/2005/01/do_us_troops_ta.html). An excellent chronological history is Michelle Malkin's "Easongate: A Retrospective," February 11, 2005, <http://michellemalkin.com/archives/001489.htm>. A mainstream media account is Howard Kurtz's "Eason Jordan, Quote, Unquote: CNN News Chief Clarifies His Comments on Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2005, p. C01.

<sup>34</sup> An example is the public discrediting of Robin Moore's 2003 book, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, which relied on interviews of Jonathan Keith "Jack" Idema, a self-promoting felon who repeatedly capitalized on his previous (although unsuccessful) stint as an Army Green Beret from the late 70s and early 80s. Idema used his military credentials to further a variety of business ventures and to gain credibility with the media such as CBS' *60 Minutes*. In September 2004, Idema was convicted by an Afghan court of charges that including the operation of a private



Finally, the simplest controls are resources, for maintaining a milblog is hard work that requires time, internet access, and some professional peril. For a blog to gain readership, it must achieve the blogging community's high standards of timeliness, consistency, and quality. Most soldiers simply do not have the time or stamina to maintain one, and most attempts wither from diary-syndrome – a surge of up-front effort followed by fewer and fewer entries as interest and effort wane.<sup>35</sup> On deployment, Internet access and bandwidth may not be uniformly available, and commanders may reasonably limit use of scarce government resources for reasons of equity or for real-world communication missions. Ultimately, most individuals have no interest in subjecting themselves to additional command or peer scrutiny – a scrutiny that itself is evolving.

### **Current Actions and the Way Ahead**

The latest Army guidance regarding blogs focuses on the maintenance of operational security (OPSEC) in electronic communications. A rapid revision of Army Regulation 530-1 *Operations Security* dated September 2005, calls upon all Army personnel to properly implement OPSEC procedures in their communications, and explicitly includes blogs in a listing of public forums.<sup>36</sup>

But the issues before the Army are larger than merely OPSEC, and as mentioned earlier, include accuracy, policy, and propriety. In recognition of this fact, the most specific guidance to date to soldiers themselves was released in April 2005 by Multi-National Corps-Iraq, the policy memorandum entitled “Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites.” The policy prohibits release of any official information that is generally not available to the public and which would not be released under the Freedom of Information Act, as well as five types of information:

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torture camp. See “Tin Soldier; An American Vigilante In Afghanistan, Using the Press for Profit and Glory,” by Mariah Blake, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan/Feb 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Lenhart and Fox. p. 12. According to the Pew survey, most bloggers blog infrequently when inspiration strikes (only 13% post daily) and the typical blogger spends about two hours per week on their blog.

<sup>36</sup> Army Regulation 530-1, “Operations Security,” September 27, 2005, p. 6.

classified information, casualty information before formal next-of-kin notification, information protected by the Privacy Act, information regarding incidents under ongoing investigation, and For Official Use Only information. The brevity of the MNC-I policy makes it difficult for a typical warrior to understand fully and comply, but it does clearly communicate that specific types of information may not be released.

The primary effect of the MNC-I policy and September 2005 ALARACT message has been to scare soldiers. In response, many established milbloggers voluntarily discontinued their milblogs, and most likely, many more never began one. Most signed off like this author of an extraordinarily insightful, positive, and moving blog:

Operational security continues to be an issue for our Armed Forces. Therefore, it is with a heavy heart that I must back away from the blogging community...I love my soldiers and want to do what is best for them...I pray that I have been able to shed some light on the everyday events that our men and women overseas deal with...into their struggles and triumphs... What I do, I do willingly out of respect for our leaders and love for our soldiers.<sup>37</sup>

Managing soldiers by scaring them into silence is regrettable given that this blog, and nearly all of the discontinued milblogs, had served their readers and the Army well.

Therefore, the way ahead must engender an appreciation in commanders for the warfighting advantages that their soldier-authors bring to the “information battlespace.”<sup>38</sup> Such appreciation may be explained by answering their persistent, basic questions: (1) “Who speaks for the Army?” (2) “If everyone may speak, what is the impact?” and (3) “What controls, if any, should the Army impose on soldiers?”

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis, Brad, Chaplain (CPT). “Fade to Black,” <http://chaplain.blogspot.com>, November 8, 2005.

<sup>38</sup> A term used in “Army Vision 2010 – Information Superiority,” [http://www.army.mil/2010/information\\_superiority.htm](http://www.army.mil/2010/information_superiority.htm), accessed September 15, 2006. Also used in Field Manual 46-1 “Public Affairs Operations,” May 1997, p. 32.

***“Who speaks for the Army?”*** First, soldiers have always served as ambassadors of the Army within their hometowns, their military communities, and throughout the world. Second, there are extremely limited numbers of dedicated Army spokespersons, i.e., public affairs officers, to augment commanders. Third, it is a widely-repeated truism that the best representatives of our Army – the best spokespersons – are our soldiers themselves. Therefore, commanders and public affairs officers serve as the “official” voice of the Army, but all Army personnel represent and “speak” for the Army.

Similar to US corporations, the Army needs to implement widespread training about information security and electronic communications to both support and caution soldiers, DA civilians, and DA contractors. In addition, these personnel should receive traditional media training to “stay in their lane” and to preface comments with statements such as, “What I know as a platoon sergeant is that...” and “I don’t speak for the Army, but I think...” Following instruction, individuals should be trusted to exercise self-control, as well as self-interest and selfless service, particularly in terms of publishing sensitive information. In October 2005, the Army began sending out OPSEC mobile training teams to educate deploying units. This is a good start, but such education should be standardized into an annual classroom requirement or web-based tutorial and a pre-deployment refresher.

Most soldiers want to do the right thing, but problems occur when they fail to recognize when their private and public electronic communications have merged. Education should ensure that milbloggers understand the potentially international nature of their audience. In addition, a more pervasive problem is that most do not understand the private-public merging of email. For example, an irreverent email from a soldier to his father is a private communication – and one may certainly complain or question a superior in such a format. However, if the father forwards

the email to his business associates, many of whom do not know the son personally, this private communication is now public. As the email gets forwarded or posted in the blogosphere, the result is the widespread publication of a credible document with serious implications for the soldier and the Army – no matter the sender's original intent.

*“If everyone may speak, what is the impact?”* When everyone may speak, soldiers and non-soldiers alike, consumers become savvier about what they consume. The fact that a blogsite exists does not mean that it is actually read. Since the barriers to internet publishing are low, consumers choose their sources based on credibility, accuracy, and timeliness. When credibility is hard to determine, consumers choose those blogs that regularly post information that is both useful and consistent with other sources. Corroborating sources include personal experience, news media accounts, and other blogs.

If the Army restricts soldiers from blogging, then soldiers who like the Army and who are proud of their service will comply by shutting down their blogs and removing their positive influence from the blogosphere. In fact, these pro-Army blogs were never an issue, because the Army benefits from the positive coverage. Most Army detractors ignore positive depictions of the military; experienced PAOs will attest that good news is rarely deemed “newsworthy.” Instead, if the Army restricts milblogs then the only voices that remain in the blogosphere will be the disgruntled and disaffected few, egged on by fellow miscreants and fakers. These troublemakers are perfectly capable of shifting the “preponderance of the evidence” in the blogosphere, or worst case, creating phony issues that create noise in the system.

Like private citizens, the Army has a limited ability to distinguish between authentic and unauthentic anonymous milblogs. One approach, contained within the April 2005 MNC-I memo, is to require all milbloggers to register with their commanders. Unfortunately, once

again, such a policy discourages “good” soldiers while allowing “bad” soldiers to blog unfettered unless caught. From a policy perspective, the Army should feel no obligation to respond to blogged allegations that lack such vital data such as date, specific location, or unit name, for it is impossible to provide detailed responses to anonymous, unspecified rubbish. We need not set a precedent for troublemakers to waste Army resources by blogging falsehoods, and the media cannot credibly publish any such blogged accusations without substantiation.

Lastly, the Army can benefit when individuals quickly speak for themselves in order to rectify inaccuracies in the national and international media. In a small number of cases, milbloggers can defend the Army more credibly and more quickly than official spokespersons.

***“What controls, if any, should the Army impose on soldiers?”*** The April 2005 MNC-I memorandum represents a carefully crafted set of restrictions, capped off with a paragraph stating, “This is a punitive policy.” Since meaningful restrictions require an enforcement mechanism, the MNC-I policy states that commanders are responsible for reviewing blogs within their commands quarterly – an additional burden with a lengthy time lag between publication and possible command feedback. At present, limited help is available from outside sources; the Army Web Risk Assessment Cell is specifically focused on monitoring official Army websites although they sample milblogs.<sup>39</sup> Unless the Army unwisely devotes vast amounts of resources to monitoring personal transmissions, commanders must primarily rely on the honor system and their soldiers’ common sense.

Not only is enforcement problematic, but most possible violations exist in the eye of the beholder – and valid opinions differ between honorable people. But as one milblogger stated,

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<sup>39</sup> Army Regulation 25-1, “Army Knowledge Management and Information Technology Management,” 30 June 2004, p. 27.

“All good soldiers crave appropriate guidance to avoid problems.”<sup>40</sup> The MNC-I policy is an excellent start, but all soldiers deserve a more expanded and operational definition than what it offers.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, the Army needs to create a document concerning soldier communications similar to the clearly-written Department of Defense media embedding ground rules which constrain the publication of a range of images and topics.<sup>42</sup> Such a document would more clearly outline what is acceptable, and unacceptable, although gray zones will always exist. Education on the document would serve as the centerpiece of annual OPSEC education requirements.

## **Muddy Boots IO**

Previous eras of widespread information control have been replaced by a present period with greater rewards and risks. The newfound ability of Army personnel to communicate directly with the public, either inadvertently or deliberately, anonymously or openly, requires updated and expanded guidance and education.

Military blogs written by those in muddy boots – of their own volition, and in their own words – give readers precious insight into the quality, efforts, and sacrifices of our force. Blogs written within the boundaries of security, accuracy, policy, and propriety are a combat multiplier in the information domain. Commanders must educate soldiers and provide them specific guidelines in order to minimize possible OPSEC and other violations. However, commanders at

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<sup>40</sup> Chenelly, Joseph R. “Bloggers in Iraq must register sites,” Army Times, July 4, 2005, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Vines, John R., Lt. Gen. Multi-National Corps-Iraq Policy #9, “Unit and Soldier Owned and Maintained Websites,” April 6, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> DOD Message dated February 10, 2003. “Subject: Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on Embedding Media during Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the U.S. Central Command’s (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR).” See Section 4, “Ground Rules.”

every level must boldly accept risk in order to support the rewards and warfighting advantages that soldier-authors bring to the information battlespace.

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